

**MISCELLANEOUS HOUND HUNTERS FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY  
DECEMBER 5, 2007; RICHMOND, VIRGINIA**

**GROUP PROFILE**

This focus group meeting was held on December 5, 2007 in Richmond, VA, to involve hunters who pursue multiple species of game with hounds. This focus group meeting was held as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately thirty-seven people were invited to attend the focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hound hunting community. Three people attended the focus group meeting; all were white males. All participants identified themselves as both current and former hunters who have pursued deer, turkey, small game, upland game, bear, raccoon, rabbits, and/or other species. One participant identified himself as a representative of several sportsmen's groups and kennel clubs; another participant identified himself as a member of a local hunt club and, the other participant identified himself as principally a bear hunter and indicated he is active in several organizations. One participant indicated that he travels extensively in North America to hunt.

**FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY**

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

**How important is hound hunting for you compared to other types of hunting or recreation that you and your family take part in?**

All participants indicated that hound hunting was very important to them. Participants indicated that hound hunting was an important component of their cultural, familial, and personal identity and heritage. Participants also noted that hound hunting, especially bear hound hunting, is an important family activity and way to develop and maintain friendships.

*"It's part of my heritage. Part of the tradition I've grown up with."*

*"It's about as important as anything after my God, my country, and my family."*

*"I remember just growing up in that area...I mean, it was just everybody had dogs, hunted with dogs, bear hunted up on the mountain behind the house. I can remember tagging along, seeing what was going on with that. The boys that I grew up with in that area, one of the guys that I still hunt with, that got me into the hunting. It's just, as he alluded to, it's a cultural issue. Once you*

*start getting into it, it just becomes more so. You can kinda go anywhere, especially with a group of bear hunters, if you talk long enough you're going to know people, it doesn't matter where you go."*

*"My kids love the beagle dogs. You can take them out, they can work with them. Its not like bear hunting in the mountain, ah, you know, could be a little tough keeping up. But, with the dogs, it's a good thing for the family to do."*

### **What are the two or three most important aspects of hunting with hounds to you?**

Participants responded that hound hunting is important because of the recreation, stewardship, and wildlife appreciation that it brings. One participant noted that hunting is an economic asset Virginia cannot do without. Another participant indicated that the cultural tradition of hound hunting in Virginia is very important, as is passing that tradition on to future generations. Participants noted that they were concerned that this study was initiated in response to a single complaint about hound hunting and indicated that it would be a mistake to categorize all hunters as being the cause of problems. Further, one participant said that the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) should do a better job of promoting hunting and stewardship of wildlife, rather than treating hunters as criminals.

*"Finally, when I became able, I got into it and I did it then, even less avidly, but enough to note its values in recreation, in stewardship, in wildlife appreciation, wildlife management....I learned quickly that all the ways to protect wildlife don't match up like hunting does."*

*"It's an economic asset that our state can ill do without. All of the people who are moving here now and recruiting from among the people who are already here to form a large group of anti-hunting people, don't, by any means, realize the value that they are attempting to destroy and they will never realize it until they miss it, at which time it may be too late."*

*"Fish and Wildlife Service data developed some years ago now has been debunked by some people now but I honestly believe they were on the right track and probably were pretty close to accurate, up until the time that they claimed slightly over two billion dollars a year economic turnover in Virginia rising from hunting and fishing. That equals a lot of industries that our government would go to war to protect."*

*"It's a cultural thing. It's one of the last vestiges of rural America....We're still willing to fight for it....It's part of the soul of Virginia...It's not just the hunt and the kill. It's far more than that. It's growing up with dogs. Growing up with dogs that are part of your family, that are your friends, that are loyal, that are loving."*

*"I have great reservations, not only about this study, but the fact that we are at a collision point now. I don't doubt that in the future the issues and clash of culture will continue to put a stress*

*on it but, I am very, very skeptical of the political motivations for this study and so are most of the people I associate with.”*

*“I would like to see our law enforcement staff in this agency retrained to promote hunting and fishing, to use judgment in a way that will increase the awareness of the role of stewardship and deemphasize the criminal aspects.”*

### **What do you believe to be the most important issues facing hunters who use hounds today?**

One participant noted that baiting is an issue in Virginia, and America today, indicating that the practice is widely done and rarely enforced. Further, he indicated that there is a clash of culture between rural and urban cultures. Another participant indicated that development of subdivisions and settlement of these areas by people who are unaware of hunting is an important issue. Participants also indicated that the right to retrieve is crucial for hound hunters. Unsportsmanlike conduct of a minority of hound hunters was also identified as an issue; one that causes problems among hunters and landowners alike.

*“Video America is bringing in an idea that really came out of Texas about stand hunting with feeders and baiting of animals.”*

*“There is obviously a clash of values and cultures between urbanized America and rural, agrarian America. Agrarian values are diminishing; the urbanized, industrial and post-industrial age proceeded to a clash of culture.”*

*“But people do move into Virginia in great numbers, unaware....”*

*“Now, we’ve got people who are hunters, own hunting dogs, have the dog box on the back of their pick-up truck, but who don’t participate in leasing land. They will ride the roads and if they don’t hear hounds running, they’ll back off and drop their hounds on some hunting club’s property, just as often as they will on some farmer’s land....But these people have some fairly noisy warfare going on among hunters....Hunters cause some problems among hunters. But, this same person, who is a scofflaw in my book, is also causing some of the upset in landowners who don’t hunt. ”*

### **What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues?**

Participants responded that potential solutions to issues surrounding hound hunting could include increased education for rural landowners about the hound hunting tradition that exists in rural Virginia, peer pressure on “rouge” hunters, and increased efforts to promote hunting. Participants agreed that hunters need to “take charge” of their sport to eliminate law breakers. Participants also agreed that the VDGIF needs to do more to promote hunting, including hound hunting, and explain the benefits of hunting to the Commonwealth.

*“The only thing that I think might have any effect is require the real estate industry to advise people who are moving in from urban areas: you are moving into hunting country and you’re going to have people’s dogs running across your land. They won’t hurt anything but if you don’t want to hear a dog bark, you probably ought to buy this tract over here.”*

*“We need, as hunters, to apply some peer pressure to these folks and encourage them to stop that because they are hurting all of us....I think other hunters can probably cool that....If hunters, enough of them, get motivated enough to deal with their own, very few, but very effective law breakers.”*

*“A lot of the issues here that we’re talking about involve public education and I think if we spent a lot less time building bird watching trails [and] did a whole lot more time defending our heritage and explaining to the public the rights and benefits of living in a free Virginia and the wonderfulness of the opportunities they have. But also, the community begins with neighbors. And the same people you’re complaining about letting their dog run loose are the same people who might be putting out the fire in your house.”*

**In the areas where you hunt, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in availability of lands for hunting with hounds? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in land ownership, change in attitudes of land owners, a combination of the two, or other factors?**

Participants indicated that they have seen changes in ownership patterns, from rural to “urban rural” as people from cities and suburbs move into traditionally rural parts of the state. Participants agreed that newcomers typically don’t understand the culture of rural Virginia and the things that are important to rural people, including hunting. Participants noted that this can lead to conflict, sometimes targeted at hunters and their dogs.

*“What I’ve seen, its changes in land ownership, changes in land use patterns. Moving from rural to, I call it urban rural....It’s the changing demographics. You’re getting people moving out, these are people who’s food comes from a super market. Milk comes in a plastic carton. They don’t, they don’t always draw the connection. And it even to me, it extends to the hunting. The connection between the agriculture, the natural resources that are inherent to the rural community. Ah, you know, the sets of values people that bring with them are totally different.”*

*“Now these folks come in and buy their new castle and they have the castle mentality.”*

**Are there certain areas where you think that hunting with hounds is inappropriate? Do you have any guidelines you follow that determine where you will release you hounds?**

One participant indicated that hound hunters will not hunt in places where they feel their hounds are in danger of being hit by a car on a busy road.

*“To most houndsmen, the thing that dictates you don’t turn your dogs loose in a given area is you don’t want them killed on the road because you care too much about your dog.”*

**Have you or your hunting partners experienced any conflicts with landowners, other hunters, or anyone else in relation to your hunting with hounds? What was the nature of the conflict? Was it resolved? How?**

Participants indicated that conflicts have happened to them, on occasion. Participants felt like some conflict was to be expected as part of the activity of hunting. However, they also felt like for hunters, there is often little recourse for them to deal with those issues. Sometimes leaving is the best course of action. Participants recounted stories of a conflict when other hunters, without hounds, shot a bear treed by someone else’s hound dogs; occasions where it was difficult to retrieve dogs; a situation where a houndsman was enjoined by a judge against releasing his hounds because they invariably ran onto a neighbor’s property; and times when dogs were shot.

*“Yeah, on occasion, I guess we’ve had, I mean, when you do something long enough, you’re always going to have some kind of an issue come out of it.”*

*“Generally what I’ve seen...a lot of times there’s not a lot of recourse if you have some issues. You know, its best, instead of blowing something up that you can’t do anything about....The real, the real conflict issues, the best thing to do is to reach common ground. ”*

*“I have had that on occasion where you just want to go in, you know, I’ve just got to get my dog. Most of the time landowners are reasonable about it and usually what ends up happening is that it’s something else that’s occurred is the reason they don’t want you in there. They’ve had another bad experience or something.”*

*“The thing that we run into repeatedly however is that when the shooting of a hunting dog occurs, a lot of times law enforcement—sheriff’s department doesn’t want to pursue it because it’s a hunting issue. Warden doesn’t want to pursue it; he says it’s a civil issue and is a catch twenty-two.”*

**Some hunting groups (e.g. bow hunters) have developed education and ethics programs that amount to a set of “best practices”. Do you think that is something that other hunters, including those who use hounds, should do?**

One participant contended that education of bear hound hunters and peer pressure on problem hunters by other hunters has helped bolster bear populations by reducing the number of bears killed, especially pregnant sows, and reduced the number of problem bear hunters. However, participants indicated that formal regulations were not a good solution. Ethics from within the hunting community work best.

*“We as bear hunters have ostracized the bandits.”*

*“We teach the young people not just that you are not going to come back if you shoot one smaller than that but we teach them why because we know about the bear, we know about the bear life cycle. We read the studies too. But, more than that, we spend all of our time living black bear....So when you teach stewardship to a young person, you are teaching them gun safety, you are teaching them how to deal with the dog, the correct way to discipline them and the incorrect way to discipline them. You’re teaching them about property rights. You’re teaching them many things.”*

### **Are there any other important questions that this group should discuss?**

One participant indicated that strict liability enforcement and is an issue in Virginia. He indicated that this has lead to reduced respect for the law. Further, participants asserted that enforcement and prosecution have been unreliable, with many counties going without any enforcement presence. This participant suggested that a good “maturation process” is needed for conservation police officers, perhaps using the street (beat) cop mode in order to improve the rapport with the agency.

Participants also asked about how many complaints had been received by VDIF that precipitated the hound hunting study. Representatives from Virginia Tech responded that there are enough complaints that people want to introduce legislation to deal with hound hunting and as a result, hound hunters feel threatened. The representative went on to explain that the model for this project was another hound hunting issue in Roanoke Valley that demonstrated that when reasonable people start talking to other reasonable people, they can come up with reasonable solutions so that stakeholders can talk and come up with their own solutions, rather than having things dealt with in the legislature. A representative from VDGIF also commented that complaints are one part of the decision. He explained that another part of the decision was regional restrictions in hound hunting by major landowners. He explained how the VDGIF is trying to get out ahead of the issue and head off further restrictions.

Participants expressed concern that a small minority of landowners are precipitating this study. Another participant expressed concern about the relationship between the VDGIF and hunters in Virginia.

### **SUMMARY**

Participants in this focus group were all hunters who felt passionately that hound hunting is an important part of Virginia’s heritage and all enjoyed participating in this activity for the fellowship, family bonding, and tradition it provides. Participants in this focus group identified development of farmland, fragmentation of open space, culture clashes between new landowners and long-time residents of rural Virginia, and the actions of a few bad hound hunters as the primary issues facing hound hunters in Virginia. Participants proposed that education for both hound hunters and rural residents might help to alleviate conflicts. Participants indicated that they had personally been involved in conflicts, citing incidents where hounds were shot or they

had to interact with landowners in order to retrieve a dog. Participants again stressed the need for education, peer pressure, and grooming—by the hunting community—of young people and newcomers to the sport, as a way to reduce conflicts. In addition, participants on a few occasions expressed concern with the Hunting with Hounds study, indicating that they were skeptical of the VDGIF’s motives for initiating the study and questioning the need for this type of process.